

# Youth-led Organisations:

## The case of Africa Youth Network for Agricultural Transformation (AYNAT)



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## **Acknowledgement**

This research has been an interesting journey to discover how a youth organization as AYNAT is organized and can contribute to foster transformation in the food systems. We would like to thank Edem Felix Azagloe, whose availability and insightful inputs make this research possible.

## Introduction

The youth population is increasing in low middle income countries. Nearly 60% of the population in developing countries is below the age of 25<sup>1</sup> and 1.8 billion youth live in low-middle income countries. This is a massive amount of people that put under pressure the economics of many developing countries. Experts and policy makers often point out at the need to bring youth in the labour market to improve livelihoods and reduce poverty. It is estimated that in Sub-Sahara Africa, there will be a need to create 18 million jobs every year in order to meet the young entering the labour market until 2030<sup>2</sup>. These are massive numbers and the challenges need to be addressed promptly.

Governments, researchers and policy makers have therefore studied pathways and reform trajectories to enhance job creation, stimulate entrepreneurship and strengthen the linkages between youth and the agricultural sector.

However, youth are often been seen more as passive beneficiaries of top-down designed programs, rather than active actors and game changers. In this research, we take this second approach since youth are the most active part of a country's population. They are likely to take some risks, responds to challenges fast and in a pro-active way and develop innovative ways of organize society and food systems. When youth are empowered, their potential to stimulate innovations become concrete.

We look at how youth foster innovation and transform food systems with a 'social innovation lens'. New forms of organization are emerging worldwide. Youth are engaging in movements and initiatives that are concerned with re-thinking the ways we produce and consume food, by balancing economic needs with environmental and societal stakes. The fresh and flexible mind of youth are in the best position to quickly adjust to the new ways to produce and consume food, and are able to better respond to the challenges of a world in constant change. Youth have the capability to look at society in an alternative way and are getting organised their self to challenge the bottlenecks in the food systems and to make their voice heard.

The overall research project aims to explore how youth-led movements, organisations and initiatives foster social innovations, and what their potential is to transform food systems for inclusive, sustainable development. This is done through an exploratory case study of three networks based on semi-structured interviews. Interviews were taken with directors and a few key members in Asian and African countries.

This research constitutes a two-year trajectory, with the main research question being:

How can youth-led organisations, movements and networks contribute to the transformation of food systems for inclusive and sustainable development?

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<sup>1</sup> UNDESA (2013) *Cross-national comparisons of internal migration: An update on global patterns and trends*. Population Division Technical Paper No. 2013/1. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; In: Suttie, S. (2015) Youth employment and agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa, INCLUDE. Available at: <http://includeplatform.net/youth-employment-agriculture-sub-saharan-africa/#note-3272-6>. Accessed 18-10-2016.

<sup>2</sup> FAO (2017) *Dynamic rural-urban linkages for decent rural employment*. Policy brief prepared by Elisenda Estruch and David Schwebel (FAO), and David Suttie and Karim Hussein (IFAD). Available at: [www.fao.org/3/a-i6595e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/a-i6595e.pdf)

## **The cases**

The selection of the three youth-led networks to be further explored in a case study was based on the outcome of a web-based scan on youth-focused and youth-led organisations and their characteristics. 115 organisations were initially scanned on the level of youth participation as well as the focus of the organisations in working on youth related issues and challenges related to food systems. Thereafter, 28 organisations were further explored based on working in the food system arena. We especially tried to identify organisations that contribute to system change and disruption within areas related to food systems. The scanning exercise resulted in a selection of five organisations and networks that fulfilled the criteria we established (see the report from the web-based scan) and especially had a high level of youth participation as being led by youth. From the five, we decided to focus on three organisations which are all organised as networks. This selection was made based on the interest on understanding the organisation, goals and impact of (youth-led) networks in the food systems, also seeing their reach beyond national borders and the potential of having high impact in the food systems. The selection of three networks also makes it easier to compare and look at both similarities and differences.

### **Africa Youth Network for Agricultural Transformation (AYNAT) – youth feeling responsible for the future of agriculture**

Background – How is AYNAT organised?

AYNAT, Africa Youth Network for Agricultural Transformation is since 2014 a network made up of young people in Ghana. Edem Felix Azagloe is the leader of the network and he explains that AYNAT started as a result of urgency and need he and other young people felt in contributing to the transformation of agriculture on the continent of Africa starting from Ghana. The group that started the initiative were part of a training programme ‘Champions for Change Leadership in Agriculture’ carried out by Africa Lead (USAID programme). After the training, the young participants wanted to take action and discussed together what they could do to change the agricultural sector. They were shortly afterwards informed about a request for proposal which the organisation that trained them was putting out. They applied and it resulted in funding to start the network and activities. Edem Felix Azagloe as the network leader says he would define the network as a hybrid. The network is part of civil society and categorised a ‘non-state actor’ with a business part of the network specialised in agri-business incubation. AYNAT is a youth-led network and Edem sees this as a huge responsibility as the network can be a motivator for other youth initiatives to form, to advocate for youth sensitive policies and to build a generation of youth leaders. AYNAT has a central governing body referred to as the management team. The network has currently ca 50 active members and is connected to other networks such as CNC (CAADP Non-State Actors Coalition) and PAEPARD.

Objectives and activities: What does AYNAT do?

AYNAT aims to strengthen the capacities of youth in agriculture, foster a favorable environment for sustainable agribusiness, and at the same time act as an advocacy group for the development of better policies related to youth in agriculture.

The core business of the network is agri-business support and incubation, facilitation of an enabling business- and policy environment, research, support and capacity building in production and marketing. Edem explains that they aim to cover the entire value chain through partnerships and collaborations. The network is, in summary, trying to engage young people in Ghana's sustainable agricultural transformation and to empower youth to lead this change. They specifically see a need to work and focus on food security, poverty reduction, employment, leadership and research. AYNAT supports individuals, community groups and student associations in the agricultural schools/departments of Universities and Colleges. Depending on the need and question, the support come in various form; capacity building, scaling and acceleration of business ideas.

Challenges and opportunities for the AYNAT network

For Edem, the challenge of operating as a network has to do with getting every member to be on the same page. A greater challenge in relation to the objectives of the network is to get more youth to be engaged and appreciate agribusiness. Another challenge recognized by the network is to successfully support youth in developing capacities to look beyond only solving the many problems of agricultural production but to transform the system. Edem says that indeed transforming agriculture in Africa is not easy but he believes it is doable if we work on creating awareness, and perpetrate behavioural change. To get further on this vision the network has realised that they need to support young people to become business leaders in the agribusiness industry, not just by talking but by doing and supporting. Another point mentioned is that they see the need to partner with the government to be able to change the system.

Advantage of being organised as a network and the social innovation

The main advantage of being organised as a network according to Edem is simply that there is so much that needs to work on and problems that need solutions but you cannot do it alone. When you are organised you can connect easier and you get heard. AYNAT has a representative on the Ministry of Food and Agriculture's Agricultural Sector Working Group (ASWG). This means that we can somewhat influence ministers, directors and parliamentary select committees dealing with issues we are concerned about. Edem explains that the network opens doors and gives room for discussion and dialogue. In a network you can mobilise youth and resources under one umbrella and create a platform which is connecting actors and activities.

As a result of the network activities, young people have been able to participate in training programmes (e.g. agribusiness incubator programme) and have afterwards started their own agribusinesses. Others have after the trainings improved their business operations and have now become viable businesses. Edem is indicating that the increase in these numbers gives the leverage to sell the idea of that you can contribute positively to the food system through agribusiness and contribute to solving three of Ghana's major problems namely food insecurity, unemployment and economic disempowerment.

Edem thinks the network stimulates young people to sense the urgency of the problems in the food system which results in that young men and women are eager to lead change in our food system. He says the initiative and network is innovative because from the challenges they face as a network, they design new ways of engaging youth, in farming, and in doing business by youth and for youth. They know that sound and sustainable innovation is a crucial ingredient in the change and transformation agenda of our food system. Edem states that the network and youth are changing the history by creating opportunities for everyone in the food system. Agriculture is then not seen as something left for the underprivileged, the poor and for those who could not go to school.

## Conclusions

**AYNAT's mission is to bring about changes in the food system by increasing the number of entrepreneurs that foster sustainable innovations in food systems.** As the network's name also indicates, they are clearly thinking and working towards transformation of agriculture and food systems.

Through the business incubator and training program, AYNAT intends to capacitate young business men and women with skills that are required by the market, and to foster information sharing. When these programs are successful, the youth will be better equipped with relevant skills and with a network of business partners and service providers that will facilitate the viability of their business and increase the chances to stay in business in the long run. AYNAT was selected as a case because we saw in the web-based scan that it was both youth-led and worked on innovation and change in the food system. The network is relatively new and is developing and finding interested members and business opportunities.

**What makes AYNAT different from other business incubators is the fact that they are not a fixed and established organization but a youth led network which does not have entry barrier to membership.** Young entrepreneurs can freely join the network and start linking with novice as well as experienced peers. The network is next to building capacities of youth also fostering linkages between entrepreneurs, alliances and partnerships. This supports a system where change is more likely to happen and young businesses can count on a flexible and adaptive platform which advocates for youth sensitive policies in agribusiness. For AYNAT, this is the innovation that will lead to transform the way food is produced and consumed towards sustainable food systems.

Furthermore, as a flexible network, AYNAT motivates young entrepreneurs not included in any form of organization yet, to look for connections and find programs, initiatives and policies that support their businesses. As AYNAT's coordinator has pointed out, this is a huge responsibility that comes with being organized as a network, and that makes it different from other forms of organisation. The network is relatively new and is developing and finding interested members. It would be interesting to see how the network is doing in a couple of years.

## Reflections and Research limitations

In the summer of 2018, we contacted the three networks selected for the exploratory case study to be part of the *Foodathon*, an event organised by students at Wageningen University parallel to the Sustainable Development Goals Conference 'Towards Zero Hunger: Partnership for Impact' (30 – 31 August 2018). The idea was to invite members of the networks and mentor them during the *Foodathon* to be able to conduct interviews and get to know their ways of solving food system problems. After intense email exchanges, none of the network members signed up to the event. Thereafter, we decided to conduct interviews with the networks' leaders and a few members.

In the case of AYNAT, it has been a problem to get connected. There were many interview moments planned but often the meeting was cancelled or it was not possible to connect due to internet outages. When asked about the reason for sudden cancellation, in most cases, interviewees explained that being a network coordinator is done voluntarily and aside of regular job and office



hours. Therefore, when job-related priorities emerge, network related activities have to be de-prioritized. The interview for the case has therefore been a combination of phone conversation, email contact and *Whatsapp* questions. This has its limitations because you cannot ask too many follow-up questions. In addition, the member that was suggested for an interview did not respond which means that this case-study is only based on the answers of the network's leader.

The network however have interesting activities and we continue to have contact via *Whatsapp*. For an upcoming project in Ghana we have the ambition to link to the network for certain activities linking youth, business and education.